Thank you! And congratulations!

Ok this speech has a 30 second version and a 10-minute version.

The 30 second version is, by total coincidence, I've been doing a project at my new job, which is actually to read and collect some of the best commencement speeches in history. Isn't that amazing? And we read through over 350 speeches and tagged them with their takehome messages. So here you go, here are the top ten most popular advice tags from commencement speeches going back to 1774. Ready?

1 change-the-world: 111 especially "save the planet" "world peace"
2 inner-voice.
3 dont-give-up: and 4 work-hard: 37
5 embrace-failure: 34
6 remember-history: --civil rights, equality, all that good stuff. 33
7 dream: 30
8 balance: life-work balance, spend time with your family and friends
9 yolo: 16
10 unplug: 15

Ok, now here is the 10 minute version.
So I have a little daughter. She’s two years old. And the other morning I was washing dishes when all of a sudden I noticed everything seemed very peaceful…and quiet…and if you have ever been around a two year old, you know that’s very bad news.

So I started looking for her and I went into the bathroom, and behind the towel on the towel rack there were two little legs sticking out, and I lifted up the towel and there was Lulu – her nickname is Lulu—sucking down a tube of bubblegum-flavored toothpaste.

This is not the first time she had done that. That’s why she was hiding.

And like the other times, I told her to stop and I took it away from her. But this time was different, because half an hour later, we walked to our favorite coffee shop, and she was sitting in the window in a big armchair and she had a huge chocolate-chip scone, and I was over on the other side of the room getting more napkins when I looked back and there was a RIVER of pink foam coming out of her mouth. Just Blurt- Blurt- Blurt. And thank g-d Lulu has never been sick before. She literally had never thrown up in her life. So she had no idea what was happening. And she looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, “Mama, why did I spit it?”
And I said, “Lulu, I told you not to eat that toothpaste, and this is why.”
OK, so I tell you this story for FOUR reasons.

The first one is that if you graduates are here today, it’s because somebody—probably more than one somebody—loved you enough to clean up your vomit and other things. Maybe that person or those people are here today, or maybe they’re not. But let’s take a second and tell them THANK YOU either way.

THANK YOU!!

The second reason is that sometimes the only way to learn things is not through people telling them to you. It’s through experience. And experience is the best teacher. But experience is not the most gentle teacher. So as you exit from the classroom and into the school of experience, try to keep your eyes and ears open. Maybe you’ll be able to learn from other people’s experiences too.

The third reason is that having this kid has really helped me understand that every single other person in the world was once a vulnerable little kid just like Lulu. This has been so useful. Because as you go through your life you will meet people who are difficult, or intimidating, or just plain jerks. One of the happiness practices I’ve come across is called nonviolent communication. It’s basically a way of speaking that builds connections between you and other people. And when someone is putting out at you something that’s really negative, even abusive, in nonviolent communication they understand that as a “tragic expression of an unmet need.” The more you can strive to see the needy little kid inside everybody the more compassionate you’ll be able to be, and the stronger all your relationships will grow.

And the last reason is something that dawned on Lulu in that moment, when she asked me, “Why, Mama?” And I said, “This is happening because of something that you did half an hour ago.” I saw this light bulb go on. See, a two year old, they have almost no concept of time. She is just on the edge of being able to connect two events that happen a whole thirty minutes apart. And this was her first step in learning a really big, incredibly simple lesson, which is that the choices that we make have an impact on the world.

Ok, I told you it was incredibly simple. But it’s actually the key to everything.

As brand-new college graduates, you’re in a unique position right now to consider your impact on this world. I know that for many of you, especially some of the most talented and driven among you, that position, that question, is a major source of anxiety. It was for me! But I’ve learned to be grateful for it and I hope you can be grateful for it also. There are a whole bunch of people in this world, and probably in this community, whose big problem in life is that no one ever gave them the notion that they COULD have an impact. And because of how you were raised, and how you were educated, you have that understanding. And that is a huge privilege.
Now, if you’re going to have an impact on the world, I believe you need to have something else—a theory of change. This is a term that they came up with in the philanthropic or nonprofit world. But it’s also important if you’re going into business, or doing creative work, or really anything where you’re trying to have an impact.

There are three parts to a theory of change. The first is the problem you’re trying to solve. The first piece of your theory of change is: What do you want to change? What change do you want to make? What do you really care about? What do you want to stand for? What do you want to be remembered for?

The second piece is what you uniquely have to contribute. What is your capacity, what is your bent? What really lights you up, what makes you want to get up in the morning, what motivates you to get off Facebook or put down your phone?

The third part is what a lot of people skip over. Let’s say the problem you really care about is world hunger. And what you have to give is, you like making turkey sandwiches. But handing out turkey sandwiches just may or may not be the best way to address the problem of hunger. You need to try it, and find out. You need to listen to the people who are supposed to be eating the turkey sandwiches. Maybe they are vegetarians. Maybe they don’t like mustard.

As I stand here today, I know that most of you don’t have all three parts of your theories figured out yet. And the third part actually, I hate to tell you this, it never gets figured out. Not if you’re doing it right. You need to be willing to actively and continuously update your personal theory of change with the flow of circumstances and new information and feedback you receive.

Take me. I grew up loving magazines and books. But print is not in a good place right now. So what am I doing? It was painful, but I realized I don’t have to be a print person. I can be a word person. These days I’m learning more about telling stories through apps and graphics and writing scripts for the radio, and Tweeting, and giving speeches and presentations. It’s all words. It’s all fascinating.

Changing like this is hard work, it’s painful. But it also means you’re growing. Closing off to this kind of change is closing yourself off to life.

And the beautiful thing that scientists have newly recognized, is that you actually can change your brain this way. You can forge new connections and build new fluencies. This quality of the brain is called neuroplasticity—plastic, meaning malleable, subject to shifting and reshaping. It actually continues well into adulthood for decades.

That’s how you turn your theory of change into a practice of change. See, the paradox is that we are creatures of habit. We are what we repeatedly do. Aristotle said that, I think. But if what you repeatedly do is seek change, you will grow up and up, naturally and beautifully, like a plant seeking the light. Thank you!